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An evaluation of the effectiveness of problem based learning as a method of engaging year one law students

"Student engagement is the product of motivation and active learning. It is a product rather than a sum because it will not occur if either element is missing."

Elizabeth F. Barkley (2010)

The focus of the paper is a critical assessment of the effectiveness of a problem based learning (PBL) exercise introduced to develop student engagement within a year one, core law degree module at Northumbria University. Problem based learning as a teaching method was developed by medical schools in the US and Canada in the 1960s and 1970s and has steadily grown in popularity, especially within teaching for the professions including law schools (Biggs, 2003). Students are presented with a reality based problem and allowed to find their own responses to the problem; it is thus an active teaching method requiring students to question, speculate and generate their own reasoned solutions (Yuan et al, 2007). Students are required to shift their learning approach from one of information receipt to information gathering (Yeo, 2005). They should theoretically develop analytical thinking skills in solving the problem and find an increased motivation to learn.

The paper will explore the rationale behind the use of problem based learning as a means of engaging students within this module and will outline how the project was designed and implemented into the curriculum. Although both students and lecturers verbally reported an improvement in confidence and in increase in engagement, formal student perceptions were obtained through the use of an evaluation questionnaire. The results of the survey, along with points for reflection and improvement will be considered as part of the presentation.

This paper presentation is intended to contribute to the UKCLE's overarching theme of better teaching, with particular consideration to the topic of improving student engagement. It is envisaged that the presentation will add to the existing literature and debate on the value of problem based learning as a means of educating student lawyers within the UK, with particular focus on how students' perceived problem based learning within their education. In assessing student engagement, the presentation will note their positive and negative perceptions relating to the task, and working in groups as well as perceived barriers to their learning. It will also explore their evaluation of the skills gained and explore how students feel it has affected their understanding of the topic studied. Students also had the opportunity to comment on the delivery and method of problem based learning in the context of the teaching within other modules, thus the paper will explore avenues for utilising problem based learning more effectively and promoting student engagement in contextual learning of legal issues. Future avenues for research and exploration of problem based learning in the curriculum will also be discussed.

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Gillian Smith BSc(Hons) PhD is a Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham.

BIOGRAPHIES

Joanne Clough is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Law at Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne and Programme Leader for the Open Learning law degree. As a practising criminal defence solicitor, she teaches criminal law, criminal litigation and criminal evidence on the LLB full time undergraduate programme. She is a Solicitor Supervisor in the Student Law Office at Northumbria University, overseeing students advising clients in criminal appeal cases.

Dr Gillian Smith is a Lecturer in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. Her primary research interests are in polydrug use (the use of legal and illegal drugs in combination) and its associations with crime and health. She has a keen interest in the application of statistics to health, crime and pedagogical research questions.